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BOOK REVIEW

## A critical look at the GI Bill's impact

By [Chuck Leddy](#)

September 10, 2009

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The authors, professors at Cornell University, reexamine one of the most popular government programs of the 20th century, the GI Bill. As the authors make clear in their detailed analysis of its legislative history and its major impact on the postwar generation, the GI Bill was an important tool in creating postwar prosperity, enabling millions of veterans to attend college, finish vocational training, obtain VA loans for homes and businesses, and receive unemployment payments.

### THE GI BILL: A New Deal for Veterans

By Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin

Oxford University, 246 pp., \$24.95

With World War II ending, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was concerned about the potentially damaging economic impact of 15.7 million veterans returning home, looking for scarce jobs and scarcer housing. The GI Bill was intended to ease the re-integration of these veterans into civilian life, at first by offering them

regular readjustment payments until they could find a job. Anti-New Deal conservatives like Mississippi Congressman John Rankin worried that these payments might create a freeloader mentality for veterans. But as Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin show, only about half of returning veterans received even a single unemployment payment.

By far the most famous benefits of the program were financial assistance for education and housing. "A whopping 51 percent of GIs took advantage of this [educational] provision," the authors write, "[a]together 2.2 million attended college . . . and 5.6 million opted for" vocational training. The authors explore in detail exactly how this influx of veterans overloaded, and forever changed, America's higher education system. Despite serious shortages of student housing and faculty, US colleges expanded to meet the increased demand. The veterans, the authors explain, "earned higher grades than their civilian counterparts." The GI Bill's impact wasn't positive across the board. With so many male veterans demanding college spots, civilian female applicants were disproportionately excluded. Nor did the program ensure that African-American veterans would gain equal access to higher education.

The authors make it clear that the education benefits of the legislation helped spur postwar economic growth by training legions of professionals. The GI Bill, they write, "made possible the education of fourteen future Nobel laureates, two dozen Pulitzer Prize winners, three Supreme Court justices, [and] three presidents of the United States." It also greatly increased access to higher education for ethnic and religious minorities who had been previously excluded. Yet discrimination would continue despite the GI Bill.

Loans made possible by the Veterans Administration, another benefit of the GI Bill, helped give momentum to an already-booming housing market. By 1956, the rate of homeownership was 60 percent, up from a prewar level of 44 percent.

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Again, the authors temper the good news with bad news: Discrimination in housing persisted. “[B]lack veterans came up against individual racism, as when a white banker or VA loan officer refused to offer or approve of a loan to black applicants simply because of their race.”

The value of the authors’ account is its refusal to simply uncritically celebrate the GI Bill. Besides looking meticulously at its many positive influences, they also remind us of its shortcomings and, by extension, the shortcomings of the “Greatest Generation.” This account is far from light reading, as the authors plunge deeply into the many subsections of the legislation, with academic prose and dryly straightforward structure, in order to evaluate its larger sociological impact. But for those interested in post-World War II history - and perhaps some who lived it - this book is certainly worthy of a look.

*Chuck Leddy is a freelance writer who lives in Dorchester.* ■

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